
**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

Landmark/District: **Walter Reed Army Medical Center Historic District** (x) Agenda
Address: **6900 Georgia Avenue NW**

Meeting Date: **August 3, 2017** (x) New construction
Case Number: **17-432**

Staff Reviewer: **Tim Dennée** (x) Concept

The applicant, TPWR Developer LLC, a joint venture of Hines-Urban Atlantic-Triden and the lessee of the District-owned portion of the Walter Reed campus, requests conceptual review of a proposal to construct an apartment-retail complex in the northern tier of the campus, at the small-area plan's "Town Center" site.

This project would stand at the eastern end of the present Building 2, which is to be demolished. New roads and an alley would bound the site. The building would face, and be centered on, a park that is to stretch between 12th Street and Georgia Avenue. A single building a block long, the project has an E-shaped plan above its ground-floor retail and loading. It would stand about 80 feet tall, six residential floors above the mostly retail ground floor.

The site plan has developed over the years and now calls for an alley at rear for loading and parking access. The building would stand at the lot lines on all sides, meaning that landscaping is limited to what can be placed in tree boxes and on the elevated courts at the rear of the building.

The drawings do not provide much of an idea of the elevations at the rear, which would ultimately face a similarly large building.

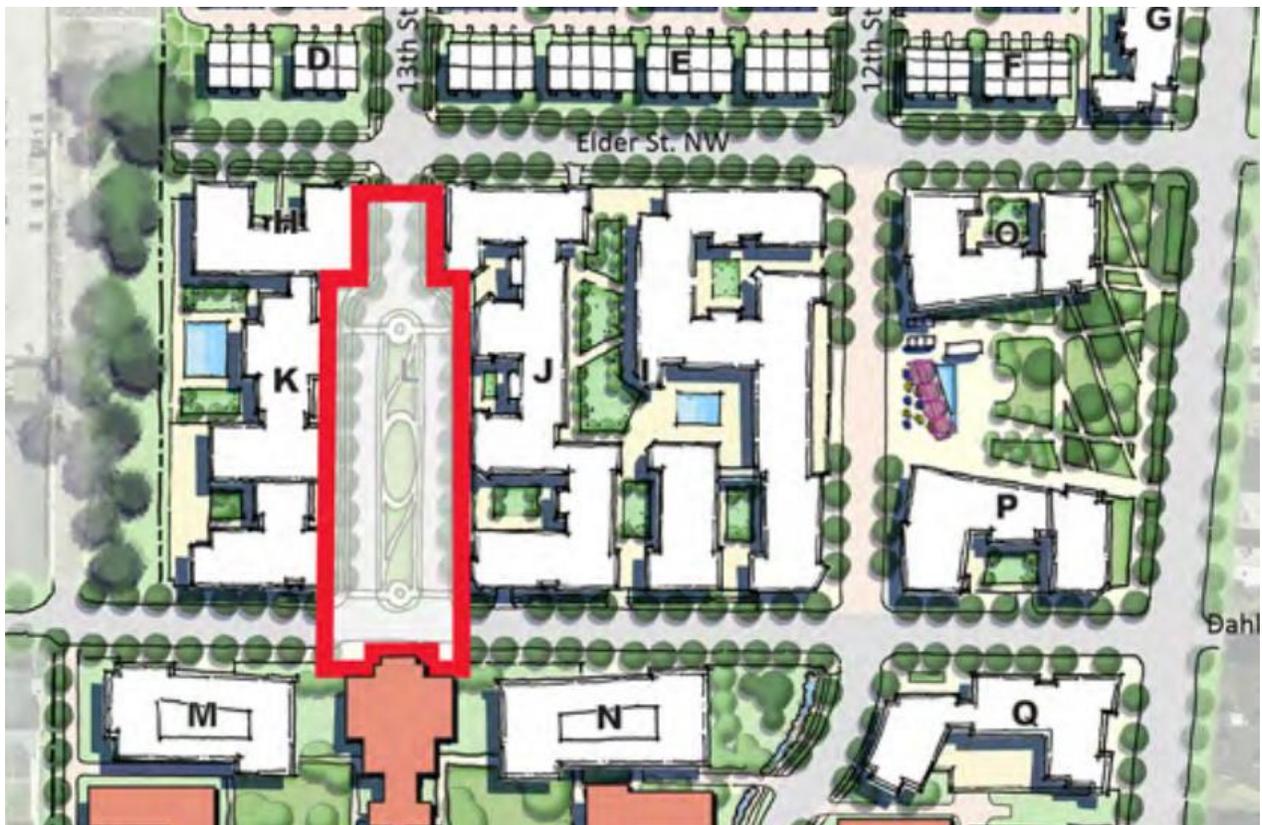
Background

The small-area plan had depicted the main building of the Town Center as a total of five stories, plus a large mechanical penthouse. The master plan and zoning entertained somewhat taller buildings there.

In past reviews of the small-area plan, master plan and design guidelines for Walter Reed, the Board generally supported the size of the proposed building(s) and the idea that this portion of the campus is eligible for the most flexibility in design.



Above: A detail of the 2013 small-area plan depicting a proposed “Town Center.”
Below: The town center depicted in the latest version of the master plan’s design guidelines.



Design guidelines

The campus design guidelines summarize the approach to the design of new buildings:

a) To maintain the historic campus character of Walter Reed, all new architecture should be “Principle Based” as noted below:

- 1) New architecture should use classical principles of proportion, massing, hierarchy, and facade organization.
- 2) Buildings should have a parti that includes a rational pattern of elements based on rhythm and hierarchy, a hierarchy of windows, a clear definition of the external surface of the building as a wall, frame or skin, a thinness or thickness of elements appropriate to the external surface, a response to the environmental conditions and local climate of the site.
- 3) The facade parti and its subsequent articulation should primarily relate to the urban design idea and the character of the public realm the building abuts.
- 4) Every building facade should have a base, middle and top. The base, middle and top of the building should be in the scale of the building.
- 5) Every building facade should be tectonically correct. Building facades should be designed so that assumed vertical loads are carried to the ground by a reasonable and convincing visible structure.
- 6) A building facade should be composed of vertical proportions, whether in part or the whole of the composition.
- 7) Facade elements, including visual structural elements, openings and details should utilize a coherent system of proportion.
- 8) The ground floor of a building should be scaled to the pedestrian.

b) New buildings should follow the guidelines below:

- 1) Buildings should be compatible and harmonious with adjacent historic or new buildings. The compatibility between buildings should be expressed in the selection of materials, colors, architectural elements, massing and facade articulation. Walter Reed should retain its campus character and presence as it has through its period of significance
- 2) New buildings should be clearly recognizable as one of the following Principle Based “styles”...

The guidelines allow for more flexibility in the Town Center area, as much of it is removed from the historic buildings. The Board, however, encouraged that the different sectors of the campus not be so distinct from each other as to spoil a sense of unity and continuity within the campus, i.e., that more traditional and more contemporary buildings could be mixed more.

The proposed concept most represents an approach that the guidelines characterize as “Principle-Based—Contemporary,” considered most suited to this northeastern section of the campus, somewhat removed from the historic core. This “style” is characterized by the following:

- 1) Vertically grouped windows providing larger expanses of glass (may be grouped with spandrels)
- 2) Moderate to low proportion of masonry to glass and spandrels
- 3) A clearly vertical reading, but with a strong horizontal elements

- 4) May have a glass corner, but is a proportionally minor element
- 5) Base, middle, and top expressed, but with non-traditional forms and less ornamentation
- 6) No, or less, ornamentation of architectural elements
- 7) Asymmetrical massing with overlaid volumes
- 8) Building facades should be composed to have a sense of depth and shadow lines
- 9) ... contemporary buildings must carefully consider the ... elements [and design principles of traditional buildings] so that they are comparable, compatible and in harmony with the existing historic character of the campus

As suggested by pages 22 and 23 in the drawings set, this concept seeks to follow an organizing principle found in some of the “primary buildings” on campus, including Building 1: “Long buildings are broken up to read as three distinct volumes joined by ‘hyphens’... The central volume is dominant in the composition...” The design guidelines specify that this building be centered on its site, on an axis with the park opposite.

This is a block-long building, so the design team has indeed divided the single building into three parts, but taken the further step of making each part distinct in architectural expression, including fenestration, materials and color, and smaller massing gestures.

Without delving much into the application of particular materials at this point, it is worth stating that the overall parti appears sufficiently compatible with the character of the campus and with the intent of the guidelines before discussing the particulars on their own terms.

Discussion

There is still ambiguity, even ambivalence, as to whether the building should read as one or as three. Despite their differences, the three sections have identical roof elevations, and each block is about the same width.

The one-building-as-three aspect of the proposal would be more effective if the design followed the direction that the center section of such a “long building” should be dominant. Some change in parapet height and the widening of the central section relative to the others could help make the center more dominant. That sort of hierarchy need not reinforce the overall symmetry of the composition (although, it could do so, if desired), but it could help the north and south wings read as secondary to the center. The widening of the center would effectively narrow the front elevations of the north and south wings, each of which is too nearly equal the dimensions of the side elevations. Each wing of the building could use more of a sense of independence and a hierarchy among its own parts.

The central section of the building has a similar issue, in that its center pavilion has about the same width as each of the flanking masonry walls, a condition that is emphasized by the static four-bay arrangement of the punched openings in those walls.

This central pavilion, a bold gesture, is nonetheless a relatively weak one and not very compatible with the character of the historic district. The scale-less glass piece projects, yet it contributes to a feeling of void at the center of the composition with its flatness and translucency. It may read as a light box at night, not necessarily a desirable feature, but could also look odd when only partly lit from within. The storefront below the projection is recessed, not only

relative to the projection, but to the primary wall plane, a condition that has not generally been optimal for retailers. This void is coupled with another at the uppermost story, another recess albeit capped with a large canopy.

The southern wing, with its recessed top floor, takes a step toward deferring to the center of the building, but that gesture is counteracted by a monumental, corner-frame element that competes with the center and suggests that the whole is a corner-focused and not center-focused building. This frame also seems to divide, rather than unite, this south “building,” neither connecting the two street elevations to each other or to the storefront below. It seems calculated largely as a visual landmark marking the corner retail space. It is neither a “glass corner,” nor a “proportionally minor element.”

Projecting balconies (as opposed to porches, where appropriate) should be minimized in number and extent in any historic district not characterized by them. The design guidelines do not say much about balconies. Regarding existing buildings, but also as a guide to new ones, the guidelines state that “Porches and balconies are an integral part of the building composition and, when present, are a significant architectural element....” The campus examples pictured are not really balconies at all, but rather double-height porches, projecting or recessed, and in each case, the terrace area is enveloped by structure. The southern wing does a better job of incorporating the balconies into the mass of the building, but the balcony voids have become the principal detail of the elevations. The north wing, on the other hand, unfortunately projects the balconies and their supporting tie rods.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board support the concept in terms of height and footprint, with revisions to be made to the elevations shown, and information added for the elevations not yet drawn. The design should express less ambiguity about whether the wings should be seen as part of the whole or as distinct buildings.